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ABSTRACT

This guide, primarily intended for U.S. university students who, with the aid of a study abroad adviser, wish to enroll into a Spanish university as part of a U.S. undergraduate degree program, provides information on various aspects of the system of higher education in Spain. Topics covered include: selection of the Spanish university; life and language on the Spanish campus; and course selection, studies, and examinations. Major differences identified include: university education in Spain is generally rigid in structure; campus overcrowding is a problem; the lecture method predominates; and urban housing is both scarce and expensive. (LPT)

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NAFSA Field Service

Working Paper #17

Studying in the Spanish University:

A Guide for U.S. Advisers and Students

This working paper provides basic information on the Spanish Educational System and is designed for U.S. study abroad advisers counseling students who are interested in enrolling directly into a Spanish university as a part of a U.S. undergraduate degree program.

The paper was prepared by Miguel A. Parmantie, International Affairs Director, Universidad Pontificia Comillas.

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STUDYING IN THE SPANISH UNIVERSITY:
A Guide for U.S. Advisers and Students

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Introduction

Over the last few decades, Spain has become something of the wonder of Europe. Traditionally a country known for the warmth of its people, a vastly rich cultural history and, to be sure, a seductive climate, today's Spain has reached an unparalleled and rapid process of democratización together with a widespread socio-economic upsurge.

American university students have always been drawn by the traditional Spain, and present-day changes will possibly even increase the number of U.S. candidates. On the other hand, shifts in Spanish society may cause U.S. students and their advisers to see less clearly the heretofore uncomplicated panorama of the Spanish university.

Therefore, this paper is especially crucial to the U.S. university student who, with the aid of a study abroad adviser, wishes to enroll into a Spanish university as part of a U.S. undergraduate degree program. To this purpose, it is necessary to summarize the basic facts about the Spanish university as well as provide an update to the university structure. The following will be discussed in detail: the traditional structure of the Spanish higher education system, the processes of choosing a university, course selection, studies, examinations, the grading system, university life and last but not least, a word about the Spanish language. The Law for University Reform will also be discussed, an endeavor to effect change in the Spanish world of higher learning--a change that will influence U.S. students in the years to come.

The Traditional System of Higher Education in Spain

While it is to be hoped that gradual reforms will increasingly be implemented on Spanish campuses, observers do not doubt that, depending on the regions, the traditional elements will continue to predominate in Spanish university at least up until the year 2000.

Thirty-five universities cover the map of Spain. Only four are private and the rest are state-controlled. Of the federal or state universities, 25 offer general studies, four are polytechnic universities, one is the "Open University for Distance Learning" and the last is the Menéndez Pelayo University, famous for its international summer courses in Santander.

Spain uses a well-known three-cycle system of studies which is broken down into short courses of three years (first cycle), long courses of five to six years (first and second cycle) and the doctoral program (third cycle).

The long courses of five to six years take place in the facultades and Escuelas Técnicas Superiores. Because of campus overcrowding over the years, a number of colegios universitarios

have cropped up in order to absorb some of the overflow of students. These colegios, generally housed off-campus, provide the first cycle of studies given in the facultades.

The three-year "short" courses are more technical in nature and fall under the jurisdiction of the escuelas universitarias which also form part of the university system. Examples of short courses are business studies, paramedical studies, social work, technical engineering and so on. The degree earned is a diplomatura or the title of Ingeniero Técnico. The more traditional "long" or five- to six-year studies include architecture, business administration, engineering, history, law, medicine, natural sciences, philology, etc. The degrees earned are called licentiaturas or the title of arquitecto or ingeniero superior. In both long and short studies, there is no such thing as a major, but rather a "specialization" which begins almost full time in the first year. As is common in similar systems, many students do not finish their studies, and many more add on several years to the allotted time.

The third cycle of studies leads to the doctorate and requires a very specialized program of two years of courses, accompanied by a doctoral thesis that requires two to four years to prepare. Traditionally, a first-cycle diplomatura may not accede to the doctorate without first receiving a licenciatura. In order to earn the latter, a "diplomado" has to add another three or four years to the three already completed.

Because of increasing market demands, many Spanish universities supplement traditional studies by creating a series of postgraduate "masters" programs in a wide variety of up-to-date, advanced courses in business, ecology, European Community law, etc. The Ministry of Education and Science in Madrid gives no official recognition to these specialized studies, but rather allows each university to organize them according to local needs.

The Spanish university, traditionally centralized in the nation's capital, sets the standard for almost all aspects of higher education. The four private universities, for example, have always had to adhere strictly to the full state-approved programs. This lack of flexibility has been partially responsible for an incapacity at all levels to deal with a most dramatic onrush of students.

In 1960, Spain counted only 70,000 university students. In 1990, this number had increased fourteenfold to more than 1 million--out of a total population of some 40 million! In 1990, the Universidad Complutense de Madrid enrolled more than 130,000 students, with some 25,000 in the law faculty. Between them, the cities of Madrid and Barcelona total one-half of Spain's university students! While most Spaniards will admit that the best professors may be in the large cities, student masses there

cause a disquieting teacher-student gap, administrative tangles and a logical lowering of the level of studies.

The crushing problem of crowded classrooms has been avoided mainly by the four private institutions which only serve 4 percent of the total demand. Studies in these four Catholic universities lead to official degrees. Since they receive no federal aid (and are even taxed), they do enjoy the advantage of a more selective student admission system than the state universities. On the other hand, there is the question of tuition. In the state-run universities, students normally pay around 60 pesetas (about $550). In a private institution, tuition may run as much as 10 times that amount. Although it is a step forward that more private universities will soon be permitted in Spain and so take demographic pressure off the state, more social division may arise as a result. The private universities will tend increasingly to be at the service of the economic elites--leaving perhaps many other groups out in the cold.

Generally speaking, the Spanish higher education system has been traditionally a model of government centralization emanating from Madrid. Secondly, the Spanish campus is overcrowded and will continue to be so at least until the turn of the century.

It is certainly not the intention to paint an overly somber picture of certain aspects of the Spanish university system in its traditional form. Many happy lights fill the shadows and studying in a Spanish university can be an academic and cultural boon for any U.S. student, if the student is prepared for the "Spanish experience." To this end, it is necessary to turn to suggestions on choosing, living and studying in a Spanish university.

Selection of the Spanish University

Because of the 1983 Law of University Reform, Spanish students are now obliged to apply for admission to their universities within the 17 autonomías or "states" where they live. Non-Spanish students, however, may request admission to any university and will normally be accepted if the 5 percent quota for foreign students has not yet been reached. For this reason, and because of the student crush in the large cities, U.S. students and their advisers would do well to take a long second look at some of the excellent "provincial" universities, instead of concentrating solely on Madrid, Barcelona or Seville.

To ensure easy credit transfer and avoid overcrowded classrooms, many U.S. students opt for one of the more than 60 U.S. programs currently in Spain. Many of these programs provide fine organization and teaching "like on the home campus," or even locate their centers on Spanish campuses, using local facilities and professors. These latter programs are generally designed for the U.S. system and supervised by "stateside" personnel.

Because such programs do not easily facilitate integration into the Spanish university, an increasing number of U.S. universities are developing direct student exchanges with Spanish universities, or are working through blanket exchanges such as the International Student Exchange Program (ISEP).

In choosing a Spanish university, the exchange system is by far the most efficient and trustworthy. A U.S. student attempting to enter a Spanish institution on his or her own will come up against obstacles such as:

Housing. Students not integrated into a program will discover few existing structures to come to their aid when they arrive. The Colegios Mayores or residences provide scarce space (There are only 6,000 rooms available for more than 250,000 students in Madrid!). This means hunting for apartments or family housing. Madrid has become one of the most expensive cities in Europe, and housing is surprisingly quite costly there, as it is becoming in other Spanish university cities.

Health Insurance. Because Spanish social security does not cover U.S. students, proper insurance from a reputable company must be obtained in the United States or in Spain.

Other Problems. All U.S. students must obtain a special student visa from a Spanish consulate in the United States before coming to Spain.

There legally exist very few possibilities of working while studying in Spain.

How to Succeed in a Spanish University

Choosing adequate courses constitutes one of the keys to success. Since it is not uncommon that a Spanish university only publishes its catalog around February of the year in progress, and that scheduling of courses is normally done the week before classes begin, student advisers, insofar as possible, would do well to have a direct contact on the target campus. Thus, information can be readily obtained, syllabi forwarded and stateside administrators apprised about the courses, credits and alternative studies proposed.

As a general rule, courses should be sought within one faculty only in an à la carte form. For example, a history major needing 12 credits could conceivably choose adequate courses in third, fourth or even fifth year of the licentiate program. This freedom can easily be granted in Spain. But moving from one faculty to another will almost always create administrative confusion.

Until the university reform swings into full gear, U.S. students should avoid coming only for the second part of the school year,

because the great majority of courses in Spain are currently year-long, and the scheduling of classes and examinations do not easily interlock with the U.S. system. Classes generally begin on the first Monday of October and the first "partial" exams take place at the latter part of January and the beginning of February (about three weeks total). The first period is interrupted by the Christmas vacation of some 15 days. The main vacation period in the second part of the school year is all of Holy Week, followed by three weeks of "second partial" exams at the end of May-beginning of June. Thus, arriving in January or February only exacerbates scheduling difficulties and syllabi deficiencies and repetitions in both classes and exams.

The rhythm of studies in the Spanish university can be a source of confusion for the uninitiated. In Spain, the student ideally attends a minimum of 20 classes a week. As in most European university systems, the Spanish professor traditionally constitutes the center of attention, giving lectures and expecting them to be copied down and learned. The lecture--not a textbook--makes up the basic pedagogical tool of the Spanish university student. For this reason, there is a plethora of photocopying establishments in the university environs which are frequented by anxious students in need of class notes.

The lecture method, applied in often overcrowded classrooms, can easily cause a certain amount of student absenteeism. U.S. exchange students, however, have to realize that class attendance for them is essential for academic success, even if the Spanish counterpart does not necessarily accept this principle.

Class lectures are the core of the Spanish university learning system, in which students learn to take good notes and attune the ear to an unfamiliar tongue. The unfamiliar method and course matter have to be assimilated almost daily by a foreigner. This is true because in Spain, memorization still takes on more importance than class participation, term papers or consultation with professors.

A very positive factor in the rhythm of studies is that Spanish classmates--through culture and tradition--will instinctively help their comrades from across the sea by providing supplements to class notes and pinpointing class material which might be vital for exams.

Examinations take place normally at the end of January and May. Because few U.S. students have not acquired the widespread European talent to digest vast quantities of weekly class notes prior to exams, the necessity of keeping pace with the professors' presentations cannot be emphasized enough. Having the material well assimilated can be doubly important as the type of examination traditional to Spain is the one- or two-hour essay.

An alternative to the normally infrequent and difficult exams might be to arrange with individual professors to write a paper or papers to cover the requirements. Professors, however, are not obliged to accept such a request.

The grading system could disconcert U.S. students. It is based on a 1-10 scale.

Spanish Grade	U.S. Grade Equivalent
8.6 to 10 (sobresaliente)	A- to A+
6.6 to 8.5 (notable)	B- to B+
5 to 6.5 (aprobado)	D- to C+
0 to 4.9 (suspenso)	F

The condensing of "D" and "C" on this four-level scale demonstrates that much less grade range exists in the Spanish system. What often causes even greater consternation is that the normal grade in the Spanish university system is the aprobado, or a "D-" to "C+"! Obviously, grade inflation is not rampant in Spain, and students accept their aprobados without complaint.

U.S. students and their advisers should appreciate the somewhat stark differences between the two systems and attempt to administratively resolve them. Thus, some universities opt for "upgrading" the grades received, although this can be artificial and unrealistic. Others give "Pass-Fail" (with the Spanish grade parentheses) so as not to affect the student's GPA.

In the future, some of these problems may be partially solved by the implementation of the European Community project called the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). Spain is cooperating in this six-year project which aims at standardizing much of the European systems into a breakdown of semester credits and course descriptions that will facilitate student mobility among the more than 3,000 institutions of higher learning in the European Community (and even more that will eventually be included from Eastern Europe!).

In any case, it is a good idea for U.S. students and their advisers to be acquainted with their university's policy for grades received in Spain.

Academic records on all foreign students should be kept by the Spanish university. If the U.S. student is full time and receives grades, his or her status is that of an alumno extraordinario which means that no degree is sought, but the courses taken are officially recognized. Many universities provide certificates listing the courses taken and the grades received. Before returning to the United States, students should make it a point to have this document in hand, thus assuring that the records are indeed recorded. Since grades are not always turned in on time, and the U.S. student may not be

able to wait for the official records to be made, a reliable campus administrator should be asked to procure the academic record and forward it.

Life and Language on the Spanish Campus

Whereas the U.S. campus normally strives to form an academic community (norms, meeting places, social groups, clubs, easy student-teacher contacts, etc.), the Spanish university has not been designed for such institutionalized relationships. Still, the Spanish students' penchant for establishing human ties may largely compensate for the system's inadequacies. It should therefore be strongly stressed that the U.S. student's success on the Spanish campus will depend to a large extent on his or her "openness" to Spanish peers. This does not imply overweening extroversion, but rather an acceptance of Spanish classmates for what they are and a willingness to listen to what they also have to teach.

In the vital process of inculturation, the Spanish tongue is obviously a major tool both on- and off-campus. As experienced student advisers realize, an almost direct proportion can exist between a U.S. student's smooth integration into Spain, and his or her efforts to perfect el castellano, the type of Spanish spoken in Spain. While most Spanish universities do not require language examinations, U.S. students should nonetheless give a major priority to learning the language before arriving on the Spanish campus. This may mean spending the previous summer studying the language spoken by almost 350 million people in the world. American students should also be aware of dialects within Spain which differ from el castellano, e.g., Galician in the northwest.

Reform in the Making

No Spanish educator will deny that a gradual breakdown of the traditional Spanish university system is beginning to take place. The needs of Spanish society and the pressures from being full members of the European Community--and the expanding Europe--all guarantee changes at all levels of Spanish higher education.

In 1983, the Law of University Reform was passed in a first step towards radical renovation. The main objective of the law zeroed in on decentralization of the system by granting much more responsibility and power to the 17 Spanish autonomías. In February 1990, the Spanish Minister of Education and the Council of Universities pushed the reform quite a bit further by adopting the following specific resolutions:

1. In order to better adapt to the needs of Spanish society, the number of new studies and degrees was more than doubled to over 100.

2. Students will enjoy more flexibility by being able to move more freely from one set of studies to another. Specifically, the three-year diplomatura will more readily mesh with the licenciatura level.

3. The "autonomous" universities themselves are to decide if the "long" studies are to be four or five years in duration, and if the "masters" would be introduced in place of a fifth year.

4. Studies will be divided into semesters and credits (not the same units of value as in the United States). This radical change comes in large part from the positive influence of the European Community's credit transfer project (ECTS).

Thus, great changes will be shaking the structures of Spanish higher education in the years to come. The content, length and style of studies will be affected--and U.S. students on Spanish campuses must be constantly informed, along with their advisers, of what reforms will be occurring in which autonomous university.

Conclusion

To sum up a few of the points in this paper:

1. Generally, university education in Spain remains traditionally rigid. Up until very recently, structures and curricula have been strongly centralized in Madrid.

2. Campus overcrowding, especially in the big cities, is a fact of life.

3. The lecture method predominates, notetaking--or obtaining classmates' notes--is fundamental, and the gap between student and professor can be quite considerable. Courses are normally year-long and with little variation on the officially determined programs.

4. Along with the above, much less "organizational support" than in the United States is to be found. For this reason, U.S. students, perhaps more than other foreigners, must attempt to be adaptable, independent and open.

5. Much care should be taken to choose courses and alternatives as judiciously as possible, taking also into account the sometimes incomplete nature of information given by certain universities.

6. Housing in the big cities is a crucial issue for its scarcity and unexpected high costs.

7. Grade averages in Spanish universities are consistently lower than those in the United States, and this should, of course, be understood on the home campus.

8. A working knowledge of Spanish usually gives a much better guarantee of adaptation to the Spanish way of life and ensures a normally health relationship with one's peers, who, for the most part, will be supportive.

9. Reforms are in the making in Spain, so that students and advisers should be attentive to and tolerant of the normal administrative confusion that always accompanies change.

And, finally, Spain will always be the same. But, like all countries, it paradoxically will never be exactly the same at one given point in time. The Spanish university follows a similar rhythm of permanence and change. If changes are to be more prevalent in Spain than in the past, U.S. students should be even more amenable to adaptation that heretofore. Their experience will perhaps be even more enriching.

Hopefully, what has been presented here will help U.S. students and their advisers to better prepare for what Spain and its universities can so generously offer.

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April 1990